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CHARLIE WATTS

A ROLLING STONE'S TRIBUTE TO BIRD

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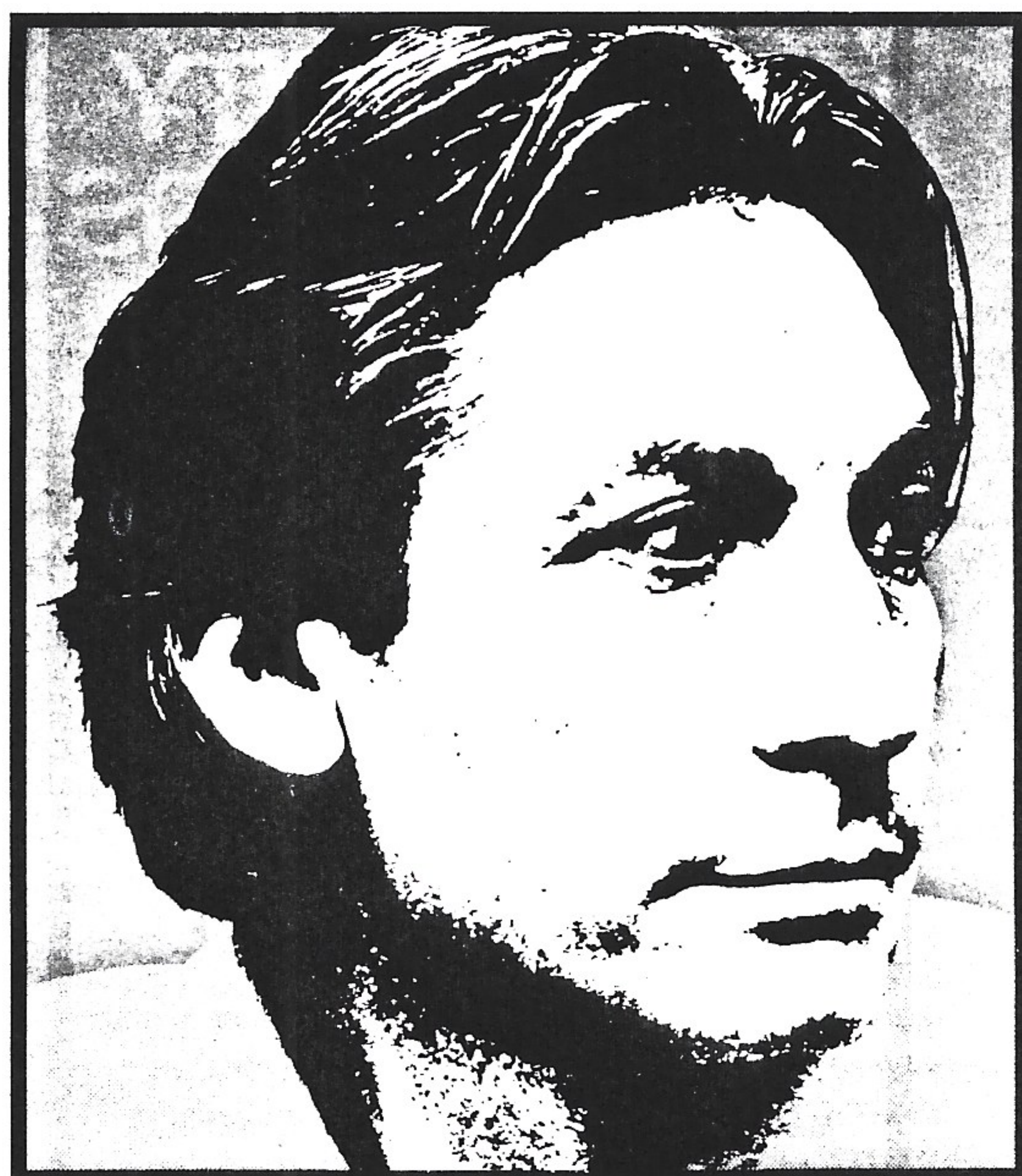
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Charlie Watts

a Rolling Stone's tribute to Bird



By Danny McCue

It has been exactly 30 years and three months since an aspiring blues guitarist named Brian Jones met budding graphic designer and part-time drummer Charlie Watts while jamming with Alexis Korner's Blues Incorporated. One of those legendary British blues ensembles through which the cream of the country's future rock and rollers passed — besides Watts the line-up included, at one time or another, Jack Bruce, Long John Baldry, Cyril Davies, and a novice, second-string vocalist called Mick Jagger — Blues Incorporated was the common purpose that linked divergent musical tastes. If for Jagger it provided the opportunity to sing Chuck Berry onstage for the very first time, for Watts it was a chance to delve into his first and truest love, the sounds of American jazz.

The son of a British Railways lorry driver who had settled his family in the then still-lush farmland of Wembley, Charlie Watts showed an early aptitude for art and an early interest in music. His first instrument was a banjo — which he quickly learned he could not play. In desperation, he took it apart, made a stand for it and played on the round, skinned part with brushes. His idol was the legendary Charlie 'Yardbird' Parker, the jazz great who set the be-bop tradition in motion and died tragically at the age of 34 of a heroin overdose.

At 20, and just before joining the Rolling Stones, Watts penned a children's biography of Parker called *Ode To A High Flying Bird*. Reissued a few years ago in a box set called *From One Charlie...* that also contained a print of Parker and a musical interpretation of the text, *Ode* has become the ever-evolving project Watts pursues outside of his work with the Stones. In 1989 he attempted to bring it to the stage with the Charlie Watts Orchestra. *The Charlie Watts Quintet: A Tribute To Charlie Parker (With Strings)* (Continuum), which was released in May, is the culmination of his efforts to salute his true inspiration.

Recorded at the new Ronnie Scott's in Birmingham, England, the quintet's originally modest 45 minute set has

been expanded beyond the confines of the book (which is 'performed' over the course of the disc's first 10 tracks) to include seven numbers with a string section. Joining Watts onstage throughout are Peter King (alto saxophone and musical director), Gerard Presencer (trumpet), Brian Lemon (piano), David Green (acoustic bass), and Bernard Fowler (narration and vocals).

Despite being one of the world's most famous musicians, Watts rarely grants interviews, preferring to keep most aspects of his life entirely private. That he consented to this one no doubt has a lot to do with the Charlie Watts Quintet's upcoming gig at the Blue Note in Manhattan (July 14 - 19). Dates he says won't be effected by a recent fall in his home that has left him with a broken arm. "I bloody hope not. I'm going to the clinic tomorrow to have it X-rayed again and hopefully that should be Ok. It's nearly mended, but just a bit painful at the moment."

Why is Charlie Parker so important to you — even more important, it seems, than jazz drummers like Art Blakey and Max Roach?

I don't know, actually. He's just someone that I heard when I was young and I just... wanted to be him [laughs].

Then why didn't you take up the saxophone?

Oh God. It was too hard for me. I don't know why that is. I heard Chico Hamilton first, and I really wanted to play the drums. But Bird is... what he is, you know.

Do you remember the circumstances under which you first discovered his music?

I was 12 or 13 and just playing it on a little record player. I mean, where most people used to play Elvis or whatever, I'd play him. There was this little crowd of us who used to do that. David Green [bassist on *A Tribute to Charlie Parker (With Strings)*] was one of them. We were young boys together. It was me and David and there was this whole crowd of us after that.

Does Bird's influence directly effect the way you play the drums?

[Considers for a moment] No, I think it effects the way I

hear them; I don't know about the way I play them. It's sort of two different things. I think the drummers that played with him effect the way I play. It's more that way around. I don't hear [Bird's] 16th notes quivering away and think 'Ah, triplets.' It's through Max Roach that I play a triplet, if that's what it is. You know, because he did it. One of the least recorded guys with Bird is my favorite drummer: Kenny Clark. I would love to play like him. I would love to have his finesse or whatever you call it.

The darker side of Parker's legacy manifests itself in young musicians thinking that in order to play like Parker, they have to take heroin like Parker. As a musician and a fan, how do you reconcile that with his greatness?

Well, the terrible thing about Parker and the great thing about him is that he is the consummate jazz musician: he's black, he's f*cked up and he's a genius. And everything he did, from what I've heard from people like Red Rodney [Bird's one-time trumpeter] or from reading about him, he did to total extremes. Everything. It's like Al Capone, isn't it? He was a murderer and awful, yet what he did has a lure about it that is wonderful. And with Bird, there is that sort of lure about it. It's rather like, you know, the night-time has a lure to it. There's something romantic — especially from the era that I come from — about nodding out in the jazz club. Don't ask me why? [laughs] And I used to attempt to be it, without knowing what the hell it all meant. I didn't know what he was playing, I didn't know what drugs were, I didn't know anything; I'd just literally sit there and pretend that I was him. I mean, as a way of living, it's dreadful. And it must have been hell for the poor man. As wonderful as we see it... you know, there's something very romantic about drinking a bottle of whiskey and going onstage and falling over, but playing fantastic and everybody thinking you're wonderful [laughs]. Do you know what I mean? But really, it's a terrible thing to do to yourself. It's not something I'd recommend doing to myself or anyone else. But for someone else to do it and get away with it — do you know what I'm saying? There is something that you're drawn to about that. And he was, I think, larger than life. I bet he was incredibly funny. That's something which the [Clint Eastwood directed] movie didn't get across, but I'm sure he must have been hilarious, really.

How well did you know Peter King when you started this quintet project?

He played in an orchestra that I had, so I knew him, but he was one of 36 [players], if you know what I mean. I didn't know Peter that well; I knew him, I'd spoken to him a lot, but I didn't know him as well as I do now, obviously.

I didn't know, when I asked him to be the lead, to be Charlie Parker, that he wrote [so] well. And I didn't know that he arranged as well as he does. It's been a lot of fun because I can just tell him these mad ideas I get, and he'll [come up with] five sheets of music and it's done. It's wonderful.

Did you have the intention that he would write the bulk of the material when he came on board?

No. I originally asked him to play the saxophone, and then I was asked to go into the studio and make a record, so I thought, 'Well why don't I make a record based on the book. Instead of doing four Charlie Parker songs, let's do the book.' So I gave Peter the book and said, 'I'd like you to illustrate this point here and this point here... you see what I meant there, it should be like a drug and drink induced bit; this bit is where he's got a hangover; this bit is where he's very happy... you know, that sort of thing... I talked Pete through and he wrote very well around it.

So it's almost as if you're sort of an uncredited co-writer on the songs?

Who, me?

Yeah. You talked him through it, so your vision really is in those numbers.

No... yeah, yeah... but he did it all. They're his thing. I mean, yeah, but I couldn't have done the record without Peter writing as well as he did, and he wouldn't have put it together the way that he did without my saying 'put this bit here, do that bit there.'

One of the things being a member of the Rolling Stones has allowed you to do is come to America and delve into the jazz scene — here in New York, for instance. When did you first start taking advantage of that and what lingers in your mind from that time?

Well, the Rolling Stones were asked to go to America, we went, whenever it was. We landed in New York — and had shaggy dogs at the airport to meet us — went to the hotel, I put my [suit]case down, and went straight out to Birdland, which was open then, and I went to the Half Note, I did all the clubs; and as far as I was concerned, I'd seen America. I wasn't interested in the rest of it [laughs]. I was ready to go home. But I realized that there was a bit more to it than that...

Did you have the chance to sit in with the people you had been listening to on records for all those years?

No. I've never been — even now I don't like sitting in. I'm not a great sitter-inner. I mean, you have to be of a certain nature and ability to be able sit in with Max Roach's band, and I never have had that.

Did you do a lot of club-hopping in other jazz centers, like New Orleans or Bird's own Kansas City?

I think Chicago is the most musical city in America. It still is. I think. For me.

Why?

I don't know, exactly. It just always seemed like a musical place. There's always somewhere to hear somebody play. It just seems like a musical city to me, moreso than any other city in America.

To the best of my knowledge you really didn't start pursuing jazz as a player until joining Rocket 88 in 1980.

Actually, that was an R&B band led by Ian Stewart, who played piano with the Rolling Stones. It had a lot of great players in it though, like Dom Weller, John Pickard, Woody Garnett was another one, who eventually went on to become the nucleus of my orchestra. So there were like, six

guys that played in Rocket 88, who I've played with on numerous occasions and who I asked them to join this jazz orchestra and tour the world [laughs].

Now that you've done this quintet thing, will you go back and do something with the Charlie Watts Orchestra?

It would be fun to do it, but it's just such a big thing, you know? I mean, it's just a huge bit of organization — and financially, this is hard enough; to get people to afford to pay for this quintet, plus the strings, and hotel rooms, it's a nightmare. And so to get 36 people, with no record — I mean, we were lucky to get away with it twice last time. It's a lot of fun though.

As a drummer, is the technique that you employ for rock and roll totally divorced from the technique you employ in jazz?

Not to me. The only difference is the volumes you play at are so... jazz is a much subtler form of music. I mean, so subtle that it loses people [laughs]. But jazz at its best is a dance music, and the same principles apply in playing the rock and roll [stuff]. I mean, if you play a good groove in rock and roll, to bring back an old word, it's the same thing to play on a jazz thing. It's just that a lot of the volumes are different — especially with this line-up, with the quintet, because all of them are playing acoustic instruments.

Is playing jazz a more direct way for you to communicate with an audience than doing the rock and roll thing?

It's the songs, isn't it? I mean, you can be a bloody wonderful musician and play a load of technically satisfying things... and appeal to only four musicians.

The other thing is the mind-set. Jazz sort of demands that you play with an original voice from the very beginning, whereas in rock and roll, everybody wants to play like a Slash or a Pete Townshend or... a Charlie Watts?

Well, that's very kind of you to say, but there are sort of the hallmarks. So consequently in jazz, yes you do have an original thing, but they all come out of something else. They can't help it. Anyone that's great is really in a tradition. That's the great thing about it. Anthony Braxton is out of whatever... there's Lester Young and all of it. Thanks to Lester Young. And Charlie Parker and all of it. Thanks to Charlie Parker. There isn't a trumpet player who doesn't play Louis Armstrong, whether he knows it or not. But I know what you're saying. I am not Tony Williams. I am not that caliber of drummer. My voice is not that important.

I'm not Max Roach, in other words. Max Roach, Elvin Jones, those are very very important voices in the progress of jazz and improvised music. I'm not, at all. I'm very fortunate. I happen to be in a very very good band, which for me is thank you enough. But as far as being Joe Morello, that is a whole other league and, I consider, another respect all-together.

A lot of jazz playing is a small club/late night kind of thing. Have you ever thought about what your life would've been like had you pursued that instead of joining the Rolling Stones?

That's really the thing [laughs]; I'm doing it now. I'm playing before 200 people and can't afford a taxi home [laughs]. That's what it's like! Trying to book this band to play anywhere is hell. We've just come back from Brazil, you know, and it was great, just mad, but promoters see you as a rock and roll band, people see you as jazz, so you get — I don't know who shows up. That's why I don't like playing any bigger than a club really. Because your taking chances on it.



"The terrible thing about Parker and the great thing about him is that he is the consummate jazz musician: he's black, he's f'cked up and he's a genius."

Is it the rare exception nowadays that someone can be a full-time jazz musician from the get-go?

Don't know. I don't think that the word jazz applies nowadays. I think you're just a musician and I think you either play improvised music or you play slotting into sort of a pop groove. Branford Marsalis can play all of it. The thing that's missing from now is, because of the set pieces that everybody has to do in the music world, there isn't any room for the individual. There isn't any room for a Ben Webster. There aren't those voices coming up. There isn't a Lester Young anymore. They all sound the same, like a bit of everybody.

Can you play everything you want to play as a jazz drummer?

No, you never can, can you? You're always thinking, 'I wished I'd have done that' or 'that's awful' [laughs]. I think the minute you don't, you've really lost the point. Likewise, there are times when you think, 'Well that gelled nice.'

What responsibility do you feel to jazz, if any?

To jazz? [long pause] To keep it alive, really. Or... to keep people that I admire alive. I mean, when someone looks at me, I'd love them to think they were looking at Kenny Clark. I know that he was black and American, but you know what I mean. By the way I hold my drum sticks, by the way I wack them, whatever. My sound, or whatever. That, to me, that's a very important part of the tradition.

What do you think your responsibility is to your fans?

My only responsibility, I feel, is to play as well as I can. Other than that it'd drive you crazy. I mean, bearing in mind that without them, I couldn't do this. Without them I wouldn't be asked to do this. Without them, the Rolling Stones wouldn't have lasted a year, for example, and it's lasted 30. But the obligation is just to do it as well as you can.

When I listen to this album, there's no way I can think of it as just another musician's side-project. How does your continuing association with the Rolling Stones effect your relationships with other jazz people — especially when you're signing a big record contract or something or another pops up in the news?

How do they look upon me? I've got no idea. I would hope that they just know me as what I am. I've got these faults and these advantages — not bad faults [laughs]. I'm just very fortunate to be in a very popular band for a very long time. And to be sort of slightly known, if you know what I mean. I don't really like that side of it, but I mean I am sort of known.

In Stone Alone, Bill Wyman's book, there's a line, actually it's part of a longer quote about Brian Jones, where you say that your biggest fault is that people don't know you. That's interesting in light of what you just said.

I like people not knowing me.

Yeah?

Yeah. I actually never think about it, to be honest with you. But the thing is, when I'm with the Rolling Stones, and it's on that immensely popular level, I do hide.

How big is your collection of jazz records right now?

It's quite a few [laughs], but I buy very choosily now. That's actual vinyl. But I'm collecting a load of CDs at the moment, for an apartment I've got. Vinyl is the sort of thing you collect rather like they are oil paintings, aren't they? [laughs] I have quite a few, but I've had them for years. They're things that I'd never get rid of, hopefully, and that I'd never want to be without. They're there. I hardly play them. At the moment I'm reading a book on Lester Young, so I'll read about this Shoeshine Boy session he did, and I'll rush into the library and get the album down. 'Ah, I've got it. Right.' You know what I mean? That's avid collecting. I mean, I knew I had it, but I wanted to know what label it was on [laughs].

Is there any one thing in your collection that's so good it shakes you up every time you listen to it?

Ninety percent of it. Yeah, there are things that I play in my collection that I think are just so — and there are things that you put on that you've forgotten about; sometimes that's what's good about hearing music on a radio, because you haven't chosen it. It just comes at you and you think, 'blimey.' And you realize that you've had it for years. ●